



Four
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Quarters

J. H. H. H.

VOL. XXII

No. 3

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Marginalia . . .

THE SHODDY SOCIETY

"Few things in life work as well as a Volkswagen," says the well-known ad. My VW didn't work too well on rainy mornings, but comparatively speaking, I suppose this particular ad is not untruthful. The real problem is that few things in life (except advertising) work very well at all. It isn't hard to look good in the Shoddy Society. We are all experiencing a gradual erosion of our standards to the point where many of us not only tolerate the shoddy—we have learned to prefer it.

Perhaps it is the inevitable result of conditioning. The infant is taken from his mother's breast and fed from his Playtex plastic bottle with the plastic bag inside. His other end is encased in plastic disposable Pampers. Does the bottle clog? Do the diapers leak? No matter. Advertising has convinced us that they are part of the good life.

"Convenience" and "time-saving" have become the pass-words to the utopia of the full-color ads where the beautiful people live. In the name of convenience, we have eaten eleven billion paper hamburgers and drunk countless corn starch milk shakes. To save time we have cooked our vegetables in plastic bags, quick frozen everything but sex (unless you count semen banks), and made the TV dinner a pillar of the American family. Let no one complain about tasteless food served in sterile surroundings, or the aesthetic effect of the aluminum plate. Look at the time we've saved.

*The word "plastic" keeps recurring in this discussion, probably because it keeps recurring in every part of our daily life. In the argot of the young, the word has become synonymous with everything that is artificial and phoney in life. I can't help feeling a certain sadness about this usage, though I recognize the accuracy of the metaphor implied. I am sad because I remember how I used to pour over copies of *Mechanix Illustrated* when I was a boy in the early 1940's; in those days the word "plastic" was a word to conjure with. I couldn't wait to grow up and drive my plastic car to my plastic house that would never wear out or need repair. In plastics was the promise of a new technological revolution that would transform our lives so wearied from depression and war. I suppose you could say that the plastics*

(continued on page 48)

The Moral Rhetoric of Nabokov's *Lolita*

DONALD RACKIN

Although the heated dust has settled gently upon the *Lolita* "issue," and critics now dispassionately explicate *Lolita* without polemics over extraneous matters like pornography or censorship, they must still deal with the permanent moral issues raised by Nabokov's masterpiece. What moral effect *Lolita* has on its readers, what faculties it excites or repels, and to what end—these must remain central critical questions. Despite all the recent and praiseworthy Nabokov criticism, including some excellent but brief or narrow discussions of *Lolita's* moral implications (like the one found in Alfred Appel's "*Lolita: The Springboard of Parody*," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Spring, 1967), many serious readers will be left unsatisfied. For they still need to determine, in some traditional fashion, the novel's chief moral implications. This, I believe, can be best accomplished through a close examination of the rhetorical means the book employs to weave those moral implications into the rich, lurid fabric that constitutes Humbert Humbert's confessions of murder, child-rape, near incest, and a life of miserable, shabby deception.

To appreciate the moral rhetoric of *Lolita*, we may conveniently start with a simple matter: the multiplicity of techniques used to elicit the sympathy, or at least the impartial interest, of Humbert's audience. At first glance, we see that Nabokov depends upon many common fictional devices (such as first-person narrative, a pattern of intimate asides to the reader, a single and completely restricted point of view) to overcome any initial aversions readers might well experience in coming upon confessions of such depravity. While such devices to elicit interest and sympathy are traditional and by no means unusual or particularly noteworthy, in the case of *Lolita* it would seem they are over-used. Here already is some clue to the moral nature of the book.

Nabokov uses many other, less noticeable strategies to gain sympathy for his strange hero. First there are the many foils who continually impel the reader to raise his evaluation of Humbert Humbert. The most obvious of these foils are Clare Quilty, Professor Godin, and Charlotte Haze (Lolita's mother); even more significant, though less obvious, is Lolita herself—the truly “depraved” partner in the quasi-incestuous alliance, the demonic nymphet whose innocence is mostly a projected innocence, one dredged up from some virginal substratum beneath Humbert's own accumulations of rotting sin. However, let us first consider the two perverts Quilty and Godin: physically, socially, intellectually, they turn out to be manifestly inferior to their foil Humbert. Quilty is the ludicrous poltroon who (in Humbert's witty poem) “took advantage of a sinner,” who, after committing unspeakable acts spawned by his sexual impotence, dies in a messy farce. Near the end of the novel, we meet this Quilty face to face, emerging from a bathroom in a drug hang-over, “leaving a brief waterfall behind him Grayfaced, baggy-eyed, fluffily disheveled in a scanty balding way . . . showing . . . his hairy calves . . . scratching loudly his fleshy and gritty gray cheek,” ignominiously pleading for life with the still rather natty Humbert Humbert who in his “usual meticulous way,” prepares to commit murder.

Gaston Godin is superficially parallel to Humbert in more ways than is Quilty. Like Humbert, both Quilty and Godin are perverts, but Godin bears the added resemblance of being the other more or less lionized European “scholar,” the other jaded continental secretly bent on using innocent American youth to satisfy his twisted lusts. Humbert describes him as

a flabby, doughfaced, melancholy bachelor tapering upward to a pair of narrow, not quite level shoulders and a conical pear-head which had sleek black hair on one side and only a few plastered wisps on the other. But the lower part of his body was enormous, and he ambulated with a curious elephantine stealth by means of phenomenally stout legs . . . he seldom bathed; his English was a burlesque. And, nonetheless, everybody considered him to be a supremely lovable, lovably freakish fellow!

. . . I preferred my house to his for the games of chess we had two or three times weekly. He looked like some old battered idol as he sat with his pudgy hands in his lap and stared at the board as if it

were a corpse. Wheezing, he would meditate for ten minutes—then make a losing move. Or the good man after even more thought, might utter: *Au roi!* with a slow old-dog woof that had a gargling sound at the back of it which made his jowls wobble: and then he would lift his circumflex eyebrows with a deep sigh and I pointed out to him that he was in check himself.

. . . he was devoid of any talent whatsoever, a mediocre teacher, a worthless scholar, a glum repulsive fat old invert, highly contemptuous of the American way of life, triumphantly ignorant of the English language—there he was in priggish New England, crooned over by the old and caressed by the young—oh, having a grand time and fooling everybody; and here was I.

Both Godin and Humbert, it is stressed, are impostors, deceiving everybody about their true identities, their true intentions. Yet, by the foil device, Humbert Humbert graphically sets himself off as superior to this other “shabby *émigré*.” And how? Mostly on superficial or aesthetic grounds. The full ironic implications of Humbert’s last words in his description above, “and here was I,” are lost, I suspect, on a great many readers. The essential parallel between Godin and Humbert (a variation of the “double” motif that pervades this and other Nabokov books and that has been discussed by, among others, Page Stegner in his provocative *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, 1966), the moral parallel, is easily overlooked in the established atmosphere of judgment by aesthetic standards.

For to the very end, it is on Humbert’s *surface* that he is superior to all his rivals. For example, the two other men who possess Lolita’s body are discredited lovers, even though, in the ordinary course of things, their rights to the role should seem superior to Humbert’s—in both cases they are discredited by their unattractive surfaces. First is young Charlie Holmes of Camp Q, “who had as much sex appeal as a raw carrot,” whom Humbert considers a “filthy fiend.” Later is Dick Schiller, Lolita’s lawful husband, who is hard of hearing, whose “Adam’s apple [is] large and hairy,” who has “blackheads on the wings of his perspiring nose . . . fingernails black and broken.” Young unknown hitchhikers along the highways, possible rivals for Lolita’s favors, are “young beasts,” or “gangling, golden-haired high school uglies, all muscles and gonorrhea.” These

are, of course, Humbert's descriptions and assessments, but many readers, certainly, would tend to accept them almost at face value.

Obviously, then, Humbert's apparent superiority begins with appearances and typically moves on to other matters. As Humbert himself writes, "My gloomy good looks should be kept in the mind's eye if my story is to be properly understood." For the moral import of Humbert's tale is intimately connected to the physical appearance of things and people. And in some strange ways, his physical superiority turns out to look like a moral superiority.

Even as a parent, Humbert appears superior to his only rival in the little universe of his confession. He *is* better to Lolita than is Charlotte, her natural mother. While Charlotte continually displays a cordial hatred for her own daughter, a hatred activated by strong envy and rivalry, Humbert's self-deprecating, almost selfless love for Lolita can rarely be doubted. However, this superiority to the other "parent" is based primarily on aesthetic standards—items like Charlotte's crude tastes in clothes, furnishing, diction, prose style: all viewed ironically by our impeccable narrator-hero.

Thus, by means of a number of carefully selected foil characters and foil situations, Humbert gains stature. Often, of course, this stature rests on seemingly minor aesthetic matters, but these matters are not as minor as they at first appear. Aesthetic comparisons constantly turn out to be moral contrasts: by virtue of the various foil strategies Humbert is made to appear (or more accurately and significantly, makes himself appear) different not merely in degree, but different almost in kind, of another moral order, superior and thus to be judged in a different, special manner. Near the end of the tale, when the despicable Quilty cries out to Humbert that he saved Lolita "from a beastly pervert," his reference to Humbert as a beastly pervert seems comically ironic. But the irony here is actually much more complicated than it at first appears. If we read it rightly, we finally may laugh because we are shocked into a recognition of the essential brotherhood between Humbert and Quilty, despite all the previously emphasized surface differences that apparently separate them.

Let us now turn to some things beyond Humbert's good looks, to particular internal attributes that set him above all the other characters in his story, above ultimately even his own ideal, his beloved beauty Lolita (his own aesthetic object par excellence). A mere list of these attributes points directly at

the leading principles in his superiority and thus at an important moral issue in his confession.

There are, fundamentally, his intellect and wit. The book comes to us as Humbert Humbert's own account, his own literary production (and very consciously crafted, as he frequently reminds us with many asides about fictional technique). This method conveniently permits a full display of Humbert's fantastic verbal wit. Rarely does a contemporary American novel depend so much for its effect on verbal texture as does *Lolita*. Style is Humbert's keynote. If to some a graceful prose style, like physical beauty, is merely "skin deep," to others the prose style can easily be the man. Humbert Humbert seems to be one of these others, his appeal is to readers who join him in this moral/aesthetic position, and his apparent superiority (along with theirs) rests to a large extent on the appreciation of stylistic purity. This confusion of aesthetics and morality is noted by Page Stegner:

Humbert's eye confronts vulgarity (his own and his world's) and converts it through imagination and subsequently language into a thing of beauty. *Lolita* is in reality a rather common, unwashed little girl whose interests are entirely plebian, though, in certain respects, precocious. But the real irony is that Humbert's power to turn rough glass into sparkling crystal eventually subsumes him, and he is reduced to a servant of his art . . . Humbert perverts life, and art eventually perverts him because his life *becomes* art. He has aesthetic vision but his moral vision is very seldom operative. Ultimately, distinctions have to be made, if one is to function in this world, between aesthetics and morality—between art and life.

For a closer view of this moral aspect of prose style in *Lolita*, witness the opening of the book. "John Ray, Jr., Ph.D." provides a short foreword. If the reader is prone to skipping forewords to novels, he is liable to make a serious mistake by skipping this one: it is crucial in setting off the protagonist from the mass of ordinary humanity, or ordinary writers at any rate. John Ray, Jr., Ph. D., turns out to be a foil for Humbert Humbert: for their prose styles are bound to be compared and contrasted. True, this foreword functions in many other ways, providing the whole confession with verisimilitude, a convenient frame, and so on. But above all, Ray's prose style is his most glaring feature; his pretentious and

asinine remarks are offensive primarily because of their *style*. Certainly the morality behind the embarrassing foreword is nearly impeccable—except that it is presented in such trite, pompous, and self-conscious prose that its very sincerity is dubious. It ends with this: “*‘Lolita’ should make all of us—parents, social workers, educators—apply ourselves with still greater vigilance and vision to the task of bringing up a better generation in a safer world.*” On the next page, Humbert begins with this: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Loo. Lee Ta.” Thus, at the very beginning, Nabokov sets the protagonist and his first foil directly side by side, and the juxtaposition works something of a miracle on those readers at all sensitive to matters of prose style. Surely, such readers are at least partially repelled by the clumsy sentimentalism of John Ray and by virtue of that attracted immediately to the fiend Humbert, who (while declaring “My sin”) presents himself with charm and wit, with a certain self-irony and grace, who ridicules his own sentimentality and bad puns, and who says to them at the start that they can depend on him to be entertaining, aesthetically pleasing, witty—even though he also admits at the outset that he is without qualification guilty of murder. “You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style,” Humbert tells his readers in the third paragraph. And after the dreadful display of the hackneyed John Ray, readers may welcome these opening remarks by Humbert as a breath of fresh air, as the well-chosen words of a man after their own hearts.

The book exploits this attitude towards language over and over again, sometimes in dramatic, rather obvious juxtapositions like the John Ray-Humbert Humbert one I have just cited (see, for example, Charlotte Haze’s love letter to Humbert “including,” as he says, “that awful French”), sometimes in a more delicate or subtle fashion. Indeed, one can view the whole confession as a brilliant tour de force, a showcase for displaying Humbert’s manifold verbal talents. The reader sensitive to style may let the book fall open to almost any page: there he will find untold riches, Satan’s plenty, written not by some detached, genteel raconteur telling the sordid story of a distasteful child-rapist, written instead by the genteel, witty, satanic rapist himself. Look, for example, at Humbert’s description of his first surreptitiously completed sex act with what he believes to be his unwitting victim Lolita on his lap:

I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a

spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. The conjurer had poured milk, molasses, foaming champagne into a young lady's new white purse; and lo, the purse was intact. Thus had I delicately constructed my ignoble, ardent, sinful dream; and still Lolita was safe—and I was safe. What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another fanciful Lolita—perhaps, more real than Lolita; overlapping, encasing her; floating between me and her, and having no will, no consciousness—indeed, no life of her own.

The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark. The afternoon drifted on and on, in ripe silence, and the sappy tall trees seemed to be in the know.

Among other things, such a passage displays Humbert's exquisite taste. Readers who are enthralled by the wit and grace of Humbert's charming prose, dazzled by the finesse of the parodies, puns, and tropes—semen described as "the honey of a spasm . . . milk, molasses, foaming champagne"; semen alluded to (while Freudian symbolism and pathetic fallacy are gently derided) in "sappy tall trees seemed to be in the know"—may almost dismiss the basic reality, the fact that it is semen, that the "dream" is "ignoble" and, finally, "sinful." The cleverness of the passage, the almost total awareness of this lecher who sees the ironies in legalistic jargon like "impairing the morals of a minor" (shades of John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.) tend to decorate, conceal the fact that morals are really involved here, that there is a morality beyond the standards of good prose, of art. In one of the best discussions of *Lolita* to date, Martin Green ("The Morality of *Lolita*," *Kenyon Review*, Spring 1966) calls Humbert "clearly someone both master and servant of his own taste for brilliant language." Might this also be true of those readers whose "own taste for brilliant language" allows them to see the wit and be blinded thereby for a vision of the moral issues?

Such literary tact as we find in this and many similar passages is often close to the essence of the confession's appeal to sophisticated readers, much as it is in another confessional *cause célèbre* of recent years, *Fanny Hill*. *Lolita*, like Cleland's

account of Fanny Hill's memoirs, manages to be explicit about the grossest details of sex without itself being gross. It is this kind of witty tension between subject and style that helps make *Lolita* the rich comedy it is. When halfway through the story Humbert admits that his darling nymphet says "unprintable things," the joke offers delightful reverberations for those who have been watching, listening to, and enjoying all the stylistic stratagems employed by Humbert to say "unprintable things" without putting them in print. This linguistic tension is a counterpoint to the moral tension of the entire confession: the great disparity between what we know Humbert has done and how we may judge him, or even identify with him, take his side against our better judgment.

Humbert's taste is, of course, not merely linguistic. Humbert—at least as he represents himself, albeit with an endearing self-irony—is something like the ideal European man of the world, the epitome of what many Americans imagine when they imagine a continental gentleman of means and genuine breeding and education. Such a figure inspires a sort of reverence in the heart of many an American esthete and intellectual (here charmingly burlesqued in Charlotte's syrupy adulation for Humbert). Although such reverence is often grounded on vague fear, self-doubt, and vulgar self-consciousness, it is a kind of reverence nevertheless.

Neither is his taste shallow. It is part of a powerful intellect. Perhaps the most distinguished feature of Humbert's mind is its complete self-awareness. Frequently this awareness is made manifest by the many plays upon his pseudonym. In scene after scene he sees himself as a man of multiple identities, all a bit perverse or ludicrous. He reports that "Humbert the Terrible deliberated with Humbert the small whether Humbert Humbert should kill" Valeria's lover. He is "Jean-Jacques Humbert," "Humbert the Cubus," "Humbert the popular butcher," and so on. In passages like the one describing his first secret climax with Lolita, little twists like "I a humble hunchback" remind us of this constant self-awareness. That he often refers to himself in the third person (indeed, that he takes such pains choosing an appropriate pseudonym) bespeaks the same self-awareness, the same keen appreciation of the complexities inherent in the entire concept of identity. And this, too, points to the moral dilemma facing many readers: is Humbert to blame for his evil deeds? Or does he escape blame because (like sophisticates in the audience) he is so many people all at once, including the innocent boy on the Riviera beach rudely surprised

by lecherous adults in the midst of his first pure act of love? Is he, in fact, in some ineffable way innocent *because* he is so keenly aware of his guilty actions? Incidentally, the relationships with Freudian theory are here quite obvious. Perhaps it is in this treatment of absolution through self-knowledge that we can find the gist of the general attack on Freudian psychoanalysis that pervades the book, the way it has pervaded Nabokov's thinking for decades (as Andrew Field shows in *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, 1967).

Someone has said that an intellectual is one who watches himself think: on this basis, Humbert Humbert must rate as a thoroughgoing intellectual. But to make his appeal even greater to fellow intellectuals in his audience, he not only watches himself think and act; he allows them to watch him watching and he laughs at or parodies himself in the process. For his sense of humor is prodigious. That *Lolita* is among other things an eminently successful comedy goes without saying. What may be forgotten, however, is that Humbert Humbert, the narrator, is the prime source of that comedy, the witty and humorous artist who makes immorality funny.

Combined with Humbert's ironic self-awareness, wit, intelligence, and good humor, is a kind of fierce honesty about himself, as well as about all the aspects of American life that he so perceptively satirizes as he goes along. Such candor, obviously, is another way in which this depraved memoirist is made (or makes himself) attractive, another way in which the reader's distaste or moral disapproval is anticipated, countered, and, in many cases, nullified. Humbert never seems to lie to us: he begins by calling himself a "murderer" in front of the "ladies and gentlemen of the jury," and he ends by saying of Quilty, "I want to stress the fact that I was responsible for every shed drop of his bubblehood." As for his treatment of Lolita—in spite of the fact that she, he realizes, is in many ways the wily seducer, he the innocent seduced—Humbert readily and frequently admits his entire sinful guilt, beginning long before he encountered Lolita, when in public buses he wedged his "wary and bestial way" among other nymphets, and ending with avowals like "nothing could make my Lolita forget the foul dust I had inflicted upon her."

Along with this unflinching honesty—which, like his sense of humor, serves as another foil device setting him far above all the humorless liars that populate the America of his confession—there is another trait that makes Humbert more than merely palatable to intellectuals and esthetes: his wide range

of knowledge. True, satanic figures can and often do remain satanic figures despite the degree of their learning. But it is important to recognize that Humbert's learning is often a special kind. For one thing, he cannot or will not *use* it to any great extent to further his devilish ends. More important, Humbert loves his knowledge for its own sake. He wears all his learning lightly, without a bit of the pedantry that so often accompanies erudition—one more example of his great good taste. Naturally, the apparently rambling confessional format he has chosen for his narrative allows him numerous opportunities to display his wide knowledge, yet somehow he never seems to be taking advantage of those rather unfair advantages.

Still another redeeming facet of Humbert Humbert's character is his ultimate innocence, paradoxical as that may seem. Surely, much of the book's power and meaning is rooted in the rich soil of complementary themes: innocence-evil, America-Europe, children-adults, or, as Andrew Field and others suggest, love-lechery. In a sense, the main business of *Lolita* is to define the complex nature of innocence, especially American innocence as viewed from both the outside and the inside at once. A large part of the novel's wit consists in its revelation of the evil European adult, Humbert Humbert, as the rather innocent victim of childish American depravity. The jaded sex fiend is at the same time a kind of naive virgin in the power of young, lovely, vulgar, and depraved America—the America of *Lolita* and in *Lolita*. Thus, any reader who can overcome whatever moral scruples he once maintained about murder, child-rape, deceit, and treachery, can have his cake and eat it, too. For in the end, his "hero" Humbert can be viewed as a sort of virginal victim of crass and perverted America—that pubescent whore who, by her own devoted lover's honest admission, "took advantage" of his childish devotion. "I am faced," Humbert writes after the liaison has begun, "with the distasteful task of recording a definite drop in Lolita's morals." "Poor innocent Humbert," the sympathetic reader may think, "poor child who failed to perceive her immorality from the start." It is her materialism, her American cold cash mentality that breaks his illusion; it is her desire for money that he first perceives as a sign of her moral failing. She makes him pay for love—and he notes it with characteristic humor and stylistic wit, a play between his tasteful, rather Old World locutions like "fancy embrace," and her crass, native, utilitarian idiom like "four bucks."

Knowing the magic and might of her own soft

mouth, she managed—during one school year!—to raise the bonus price of a fancy embrace to three, and even four bucks, O Reader! Laugh not, as you imagine me, on the very rack of joy noisily emitting dimes and quarters, and great big silver dollars like some sonorous, jingly and wholly demented machine vomiting riches; and in the margin of that leaping epilepsy she would firmly clutch a handful of coins in her little fist, which, anyway, I used to pry open afterwards unless she gave me the slip, scrambling away to hide her loot.

This enumeration of Humbert's redeeming virtues could, of course, continue, but I shall end it here with what seems most significant. In spite of his many sins, Humbert is superior to all the other figures of his story because of his zest for life. Any reader—sympathetic to Humbert or not—can find this *joie de vivre* on every page: he can find it in the loving descriptions of the American landscape ignored or even deflowered by the Americans themselves. He can find it embedded in lush passages where Humbert, like a connoisseur, savors with joy and chaste wonder each little experience of life. Most noticeably, he can find it in Humbert's dazzling passion for Lolita. What Lionel Trilling said about *Lolita* (in his review of the first American edition in 1958) may be in part rather embarrassing; yet it is in large measure true. *Lolita* is, he said, "not about sex, but about love." This view of course is too simplistic: *Lolita* is about both sex and love; in Humbert's confession they are almost inseparable. But in speaking about Humbert as lover, Trilling was accurate: "In recent fiction," he wrote, "no lover has thought of his beloved with so much tenderness . . . no woman has been so charmingly evoked, in such grace and delicacy, as Lolita." In our loveless age, this ability to truly love goes a long way toward eliciting our sympathy. As Martin Green writes, "Humbert, we are convinced, does want Lolita fully; he does love her. It is a perverse love, but it is love, and so is to be sympathized with."

However, love is not the whole issue. It may very well be that Trilling, Green, and many other readers committed to aesthetic considerations have been partially taken in by Humbert Humbert, the arch-trickster of arch-trickster Nabokov's novels. For all that I have said points to the major strategy in the moral rhetoric of the book: by means of his multifarious devices of self-elevation, Humbert seduces the intellectual, aesthetically oriented reader. Such a reader is drawn into a snare where he

finds it practically impossible to condemn the confessor of these horrendous acts. He has more or less abdicated his moral responsibility in the act of being dazzled, wooed, conquered by a lover of almost infinite grace, charm, wit, and taste. Page Stegner admits that "unattractive as he can be, [Humbert] is given by his creator a certain persuasiveness and charm that all of his crimes cannot wipe out." Indeed, there must be many who are so attracted by the Humbert whom Humbert creates with his delighted readers' collusion that his persuasiveness and charm finally wipe out all of his crimes.

It must be emphasized that Humbert's love for Lolita is not based solely on bestial passion. The last scene with Lolita is ample proof. Now she is clearly no longer the adorable nymphet, the replica of the archetypal Annabel. Now she is a slovenly housewife, Mrs. Dolly Schiller—fully pregnant, ensconced in a "drab parlor-bedroom" with sloppy, bulging body and "washed-out gray eyes." And yet to Humbert she is still his beloved:

Curious: although actually her looks had faded, I definitely realized, so hopelessly late in the day, how much she looked—had always looked—like Botticelli's russet Venus—the same soft nose, the same blurred beauty.

"Looks" are obviously still important here. Indeed, the reference to Botticelli underscores the aesthetic nature of Humbert's judgment. But the fact that his love is in great measure aesthetic in no way imperils its purity. In fact, because it is aesthetic, it can appear somehow purer, beyond, as Stephen Dedalus might say, desire or loathing, static rather than kinetic. This final view of Lolita as Botticelli's Venus helps to illuminate Humbert's attitude towards his nymphet throughout the confession. Never were his love and lust merely physical. In his earliest encounters with her there is almost always the suggestion of a "purer" emotion. For example, we find this passage near the beginning of his acquaintance with Mrs. Haze and her desirable daughter:

She had been crying after a routine row with her mother and . . . had not wished me to see her swollen eyes: she had one of those tender complexions that after a good cry get all blurred and inflamed, and morbidly alluring. I regretted keenly her mistake about my private aesthetics, for I simply love that tinge of Botticellian pink.

Once again, the undeniable lust is tempered by a kind of love,

perverse as it may be. And to make Humbert's ability to love even more attractive, there is no other character in the entire book who demonstrates even the capability to love purely, to love aesthetically, to love, it may finally be, mawkishly and foolishly beyond the bounds of intelligence, of good taste, of art itself.

Thus, by this demonstration of his ability to love Lolita, Humbert paradoxically transmutes the reader's sympathy into actual *respect*. Witness Martin Green:

That Humbert manages to love Lolita makes a powerful claim on our respect. He knows her completely, and he loves her completely, sensually and sentimentally and for herself, all at the same time. And he does so in that tradition of romantic love which is so important in our culture. Humbert loves Lolita in the way that Dante loved Beatrice, the way Petrarch loved Laura, the way Poe loved Virginia, the way Don Jose loved Carmen. The references to these great, tragic, idealistic love affairs run through the novel and challenge us to deny that Humbert's feelings belong to the same family and deserve the same respect.

I said earlier that Humbert Humbert, in order to procure an audience, obviously has to overcome the repugnance many readers might feel when faced with explicit confessions of perversion and gross cruelty, with details like the sobs of little Lolita in the night, "every night, every night—the moment I feigned sleep." But the rhetorical methods he uses to overcome this repugnance, as I have argued, would have to be considered exorbitant (and thus a serious flaw in the book's design) if they were applied merely to overcome the general reader's natural distaste. It seems that Nabokov's aim is to elicit more than interest, impartiality, or even faint sympathy. He wants, I believe, to force the reader into some sort of actual identification with his perverted protagonist. Passages like the following make that intention clearer; Humbert writes near the beginning of his story:

I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves how careful, how chaste, the whole wine-sweet event is if viewed with what my lawyer has called . . . "impartial sympathy."

Over and over, there are such references to the reader's participation.

However, Humbert assuredly will not win over *all* readers. Many, in fact, will remain adamant in the face of Humbert's innumerable seductive charms. But many will succumb, indeed identify with this man who calls himself "monster." And among those who do go the whole way to identification, there will be a good number, I submit, who will end by excusing, overlooking, perhaps even justifying, Humbert's evil deeds, seeing him as the sole innocent in the entire episode. Those readers who can best be reached and attracted by physical beauty, prose style, wit, intelligence, intellectual complexity and awareness, wide learning, clever parody, impeccable taste, and continental manners—those readers are most likely to lose their moral perspective in their assessment of Humbert. Like him, they will be esthetes and intellectuals themselves. In some fashion they will be his *brothers*. Humbert himself, being the satanically perceptive man that he is, recognizes this fact: constantly he addresses his reader in fraternal tones. As he perceives the horrible Quilty as his spiritual brother and twin because "his genre, his type of humor . . . the tone of his brain, had affinities with [Humbert's] own," so too at the end he can call to the reader who has come along with him that far into his confession, "Reader! Bruder!" Again, even nearer the end of the book, Humbert writes: "for several minutes I sat quite still in my old car . . . at the end of my journey, at my gray goal, *finis*, my friends, *finis*, my fiends."

Is it too far-fetched to relate this unusual fraternalism to Baudelaire's opening to *Les Fleurs du mal*, to his cry of identification with his reader, the "hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère"? Perhaps—although the case has been well established (for example, by Alfred Appel in "The Art of Nabokov's Artifice," *Denver Quarterly*, Spring 1968). But certainly one cannot argue that there is no relation to the American "Baudelaire," to the figure so admired by the perverted author of those confessional *Fleurs*, to Edgar Allan Poe. In the context I have outlined thus far, the many and varied references to Poe become clear contributions to the moral argument of *Lolita*. Poe, or more accurately the Poe of popular imagination, is a central image. In the very beginning of Humbert's confession, we are introduced to the "initial girl-child," his first love Annabel Leigh, whom he loved and lost in a "princedom by the sea." And throughout the confession, references to Poe and "Annabel Lee" abound. Humbert often identifies himself with Poe, and to a lesser extent Lolita with Poe's first cousin and child-wife Virginia Clemm. As Humbert says

Virginia was not quite fourteen when Harry Edgar possessed her. He gave her lessons in algebra. *Je m'imagine cela*. They spent their honeymoon at Petersburg, Fla. "Monsieur Poe-poe," as that boy in one of Monsieur Humbert Humbert's classes in Paris called the poet-poet.

Thus, as the critics have observed, the doubleness of his pseudonym refers in part to his double, this Monsieur Poe-poe, the poet-poet; and when he tells us at the very end of his confession that his choice of "Humbert Humbert" for "some reason . . . expresses the nastiness best," he is once again referring to the Poe who has lurked behind almost every scene of his narrative and peeped through countless witticisms and puns.

It is too simple to say Nabokov used Poe so extensively merely because Poe best represents American "nastiness," because Poe is a kind of archetypal American pervert, a second-rate, homegrown poet-madman driven by some of the same sexual obsessions that drive the third-rate, transplanted poet Humbert Humbert. The very fact that Americans themselves view Poe as satanic and that Europeans (like Poe's devoted French translator Baudelaire) sometimes revere this shabby Satan hints at more wide-ranging possibilities. When Humbert and Charlotte are married—that is, when the European gentleman marries the gross American mother solely as a means to acquire her little, seemingly innocent daughter, whom he calls things like "my nymphet, my beauty and bride"—Humbert uses a new name in the society column of the local newspaper: Edgar H. Humbert. He explains: "I threw in the 'Edgar' just for the heck of it." It is the "heck" of it which indeed indicates the fuller function of all the Poe allusions "thrown in" from beginning to end. Poe is one of the damned, and yet like Humbert himself, and like Baudelaire too, he seems to escape damnation, at least in the minds of many of his literary admirers. Scholars, esthetes, intellectuals are often too ready to excuse or condone the hellish actions of confessors like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Baudelaire, Proust, or Poe—all of whom are related to Humbert through explicit allusions and parodies in the novel—because they as artists are somehow felt to be above the moral considerations that apply to common men of ordinary intellect, taste, aesthetic perception, sensibility, or artistic ability. These admirers may in their admiration forget what Humbert never forgets and never ceases to whisper or even shout to us, that he is "a sad-eyed degenerate cur," "satanic," "bestial," a "pentapod monster," "a maniac," "a sinner," "an artist and

a madman" devoid of moral responsibility.

All along, whether they knew it or not, the readers were meant to be Humbert's judges. Like Poe's "winged seraphs of heaven," we are Humbert's "winged gentlemen of the jury!" His last thoughts are of "aurochs and angels" and "the refuge of art." Readers can easily miss the fact that, as Humbert says, "this book is about Lolita"; they can easily fail to hear when Humbert says such things as "Did I ever mention that her bare arm bore the 8 of a vaccination? That I loved her hopelessly? That she was only fourteen?"

Of course, Humbert himself tells us that "Lolita . . . proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel." Clearly, she was never the pure, unspoiled, virginal America Humbert had childishly dreamed her to be. Quilty too was far from innocent. Even Charlotte Haze was guilty of many sins. But this, as Humbert realizes, is no way out. Regardless of the moral failings of his victims and doubles, his actions were sinful. The final irony, then, may be found at the very end of the confession when Humbert admits that he originally wrote his full account to, as he says, "save not my head, of course, but my soul." He realizes that he is a terrible sinner, that his whole entertaining story has been, from beginning to end, a *confession* of guilt, punctuated liberally with references to himself as a "devil." He may be wrong about Lolita's innocence, but he is not wrong about his "own dreadful cumbersome sins."

The irony, naturally, is that those readers I have described who may be seduced by Humbert's many charms (seduced where shallow Lolita is not) are left in a moral quandary at the end. For Humbert realizes that morals based on aesthetics or on some sliding scale of taste and intellect will never do. He turns out, so to speak, superior to his final and most important foil, his sophisticated reader: unlike the esthetes and intellectuals who have identified with him, become his doubles, and finally forgiven or justified his horrendous acts, Humbert ends by proclaiming his damnation. Those who laughed at John Ray because of his tasteless, humorless, flatfooted assertions in the foreword to the confession have been taken in. Their morality has been subverted, never Humbert's. Ray says that *Lolita* is "a tragic tale tending unswervingly to nothing less than a moral apotheosis." He continues:

No doubt [Humbert] is horrible, he is abject, he is a shining example of moral leprosy. . . . A desperate honesty that throbs through his confession does not absolve him from sins of diabolical cunning. He

is abnormal. He is not a gentleman.

. . . As a case history, "Lolita" will become, no doubt, a classic in psychiatric circles. As a work of art, it transcends its expiatory aspects; and still more important to us than scientific significance and literary worth, is the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader; for in this poignant personal study there lurks a general lesson; the wayward child, the egotistic mother, the panting maniac . . . warn us of dangerous trends; they point out potent evils.

These remarks are patently tasteless, pedantic, a bit stupid. But ironically buried in them is the essential truth that Ray himself seems to miss. More important, however, is the fact that the reader who bases his moral principles on taste, who judges human actions by the standards of art, who excuses sinners because they are intelligent and witty, surely misses a fact that Humbert never forgets: that *Lolita* is, above all else, a picture of "moral leprosy," of "sins of diabolical cunning," of "potent evils." These evils, this moral leprosy is, as I have tried to show, beyond the understanding of a John Ray, Jr., Ph.D.—these evils lurk in the reader himself, who may, if he abandons himself to aesthetic considerations alone, truly miss "the ethical impact the book should have on the serious reader."

Aubade

W. H. AUDEN

(after Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy)

Beckoned anew to a world
where wishes alter nothing,
expelled from the padded cell
of sleep and re-admitted
to involved humanity,
again, as wrote Augustine,
I know that I am and will,
I am, knowing and willing,
I will to be and to know,
facing in four directions,
outwards and inwards in Space,
observing and reflecting,
backwards and forwards through Time,
recalling and forecasting.

Out there, to the Heart, there are
no dehumanised objects,
each one has its Proper Name,
There is no Neuter Gender.
Flowers fame their splendid shades,
Trees are proud of their posture,
Stones are delighted to lie
just where they are. Few bodies
comprehend, though, an order,
few can obey or rebel,
so, when they must be managed,
Love is no help: we must opt
to eye them as mere others,
must count, weigh, measure, compel.

Within a Place, not of Names
but of Personal Pronouns,
Where *I* hold council with *Me*,
and recognise as present
Thou and *Thou*, comprising *We*,
unmindful of the meinie,
all those *we* think of as *They*.
No voice is raised in quarrel,
but quietly *We* converse,
in turns relate tall stories,
at times just sit in silence,
and on fit occasion *I*
sing verses *sotto-voce*,
made on behalf of *Us* all.

But Time, the Domain of Deeds,
calls for a complex grammar
with many moods and tenses,
and prime the Imperative.
We are free to choose our paths,
but choose we must, no matter
where they lead, and the tales we
tell of the Past must be true.
Human Time is a City
where each inhabitant has
a political duty
nobody else can perform,
made cogent by Her motto;
Listen, mortals, lest ye die.

Posala's Coat

M. M. LIBERMAN

His eccentricities are as well known to the readers of Posala as are his poems. His enthusiasm for very young girls is as notorious as the water imagery in "Exilium" is adored by two generations of students, not to mention their teachers. His publisher, whom he made wealthy, was uneasy about his drinking, but a New York journalist let that dog come in. An unauthorized biography, while he was still alive, tried to make of Posala a figure of fun with its preposterously detailed account of his obsession with clothes, but the story of his losing his overcoat in Chicago is, curiously, almost unknown. I met him when he came to Mexico on his way around the world. On his death his mistress wrote to me.

Posala's coat was made for him in Ireland. It was a reddish brown in color, in a marvelously woven tweed. He had thirty-two fittings. The tailor, Keenan, threatened to kill him twice. Posala was of medium stature with very white skin and the blackest straight hair. His face was thin, especially his nose. His type is most striking in Mexico City, where among the Indians he is plainly the Spaniard. He thought he looked magnificent in this coat, which he did not need in Mexico City, where it never gets as cold as it does in Dublin. Nevertheless, when he didn't wear it, he usually carried it on his arm like a shield. He seldom left it at home. He had a British raincoat, of which he was also passionately fond, but there is no comparison.

In New York, Posala eschewed taxis in favor of subways, somewhat to the chagrin of Olga Green, who was twenty-two but looked twelve, which, in part, accounted for her success on the stage. There was no denying her splendid voice. Coming out of an apparent child, it mesmerized audiences for several years. Olga never looked old, even at the end, when she died of drugs. Olga's love for Posala had nothing to do with his fame. She was

scarcely aware of it. She did know of his wealth, however, although she was not avaricious. She could not understand why, if Posala was rich, he wanted to be uncomfortable in the subways, when he could be comfortable in the cabs, although every time they went somewhere he tried dramatically to explain. In his left hand he would carry a silk handkerchief, and on his right arm the tweed coat. He would, by a series of deft movements, arrange, in ascending order, his trousers, the right hand of Olga Green, the handkerchief, so as not to soil the coat, and the coat itself. Between, say, Greenwich Village and Times Square, what with the thrusting and bouncing movement of the train, Olga transported Posala. It pleased her to delight him. But, as I say, her memory was poor. She once told Manfred Talliaferro in Madrid that Posala was like a sweet dog needing to be fed.

I flatter myself that I was not put off, as were most, by Posala's habitual moments of facetiousness. When the historians Kleinmaster and Millard, the latter, himself, black as Belgian night, were speculating on Negro military heroes, Posala advocated George Washington, who, he supposed from his name, had been born in American Georgia.

Posala liked Chicago because it is the most North American of all North American cities. Ugly, vulgar, brutal and altogether boring to him, it usually impelled him to get drunk before two in the afternoon. He would get up again at midnight to work for a while and then sleep until noon that day. After a week of this he would feel quite rejuvenated and leave the city for wherever it was that his presence was called for. He inevitably stayed at the Penguin, a pretentious old mausoleum with a poisonous seafood restaurant which he patronized as often as he found it open. In Chicago Posala liked the young girls, especially. His favorite was Maryanna Malfi, an accomplished enculeuse and a rather good poet in her own right. She had been published at thirteen. She was fifteen when she was introduced to Posala by the director of the Oldfield Library who had known her since she was twelve. She had come to work there one summer as an assistant cataloguer.

Posala came to Chicago this autumn at the invitation of *Prosody*, the most distinguished poetry journal in the Western hemisphere, to participate in a symposium. At the cocktail party the first day he thought he would meet Maryanna but she wasn't there. He tried to call her several times but she seemed to have abandoned her apartment because, when he went directly there, risking an encounter with her mother, no one answered the bell.

Discouraged momentarily and angry, he returned to the Penguin where he made several more phone calls but no one in Chicago seemed to be at home. He thought of returning to the *Prosody* party, which would surely be yet in progress, but the thought of still more murderous boredom in the company of fat middle aged ladies with lots of money, and epicene young editors, with sewers for minds, depressed him, and he decided to go nowhere. Outside the wind howled like a wounded wolf. Only October, the night was freezing. He would have a few drinks downstairs in the Silver Swan Room, take the elevator to his bed, get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, well, he would see. He never got to the symposium.

He awoke the next morning earlier than he wanted, feeling both hungry and dizzy. The roof of his mouth was a pain, telling him he had smoked too many cigarettes. He could recall having conversed with the bartender about some silly business but he could not remember exactly when he decided he had had enough. He had better get some solid food in his stomach, he now decided, and he put on the same clothes he had worn the night before, but they did not offend him because he wore expensive scents. He only combed his hair. He discovered he had no cigarettes. In the elevator he panicked at the thought he might have locked himself out of his room because he could not tolerate the superior attitudes of desk clerks. He found the key, however, in a pocket in which he usually put nothing except his "scraps," as he called them. These were snippets of paper napkins, or whatever was handy, on which he would write a word or a phrase or a line. Benz-Levi says Posala wrote the entire first draft of "Helene" that way, sitting in a Yugoslav phone booth, trying to call a friend's daughter. Olga Green says Benz-Levi is incapable of the truth, and that the only real fiction he has written are lies about the very people who have done him the most favors. This time he found a scrap presumably written at the bar, which he did not recall composing. In any case, he had pencilled this:

And she's behind him, landlocked in their bed
Wrapped in her own groundcloud of winter dreams,
How does she move? Whom does she wed
While sea-run rainbows, separate, fight the streams

Since the lines, nice as they are, were plainly not his own, he became ill, vacated the elevator in the nick of time, vomited into a potted plant, and went on to the Imperial Room for orange juice, fried eggs, kidneys, toast and coffee. When he was finished, he returned to his room, and made ready for the symposium, but as he prepared to leave, he could not find his

coat, which at first he supposed to be stolen, but which, as he soon realized, he had left in the bar.

Now, listen. The authority for what I have told you so far is, among others, Olga Green. Posala phoned Olga from the Penguin when he realized that he had no coat. He kept her on the line a good hour.

He told her he was haunted by the fear of death. Yes, he understands the fear. His dreams have told him. He is in love with an eleven year-old girl. No, no. This girl is not actual. He was nine at the time. He cannot forget her, because she asked him to kiss her and he would not. He was too shy. After that she scorned him. His humiliation had been complete. Now he wonders if his poems are his own. Is he an actor, a plagiarist? Does he simply imitate other poems, so that, in truth, they are not his own? Is he simply standing on his head for Lisa Toledano so that she will notice him again? Will he die before she does? To her everlasting grief, Olga wrote, she laughed at him and told him to look for his coat in a whorehouse. The rest is invention based on surmise.

Posala sits for a while in the lobby, smoking. For the minute he forgets about his coat and wonders about Olga. She has often been temperamental, but meanness is out of character. She can go to the devil, he thinks. Fellatrices are a peso a ton. His coat. He will go to the bar and reclaim it. It is certainly there, because the bartender would have noticed it after he had left and put it aside. After all, he tips generously. He will reclaim his coat and have one or two and there will still be time for the symposium. When he gets there the Silver Swan Room is closed. A sign says they will be open at noon. It is now only a few minutes after eleven. He realizes with a shudder that the symposium—the first session, at least—started an hour ago, without him. To the devil, too, with the symposium. More than anything or anyone he wants his coat. He is already cold, in this overheated crypt of a hotel, without it. Imagine what it is outside without a coat. His teeth chatter at the thought.

He walks very fast through the lobby and when he reaches the door he runs across the street to the Bay, a cheap saloon, and orders a drink which he gulps and then another. He is shaking all over, but the drinks begin to calm him. He has another and feels warmer. He leaves the Bay and summons a taxi. It is not too bad in the car. The heater is on. He asks the driver to close the one open window. The driver refuses. He says with the heater on there must be at least one window partly open. Posala curses him under his breath and tells him to take him to

Englander, Ltd. He will buy a new coat. He curses himself for this lack of moderation. Why hasn't he the patience to wait until the Silver Swan is open? He will wind up with two coats. This is idiocy. So be it. The Englander is not open either, but the manager, locked in, sees him standing at the door and opens it. He sells him a coat three sizes too large. Never mind. A man must have a coat. Once again in the cab, he cannot get himself to put it on. It is expensive but it is in bad taste. The shoulders are for a pimp, the belt for a pickpocket. At the Silver Swan, sure enough, the bartender has his coat. The real coat. Posala gives him twenty dollars and heads back, with two coats, to the Englander, Ltd. He will return the coat he has just purchased. It is not the money. No. He simply does not want the new coat. Once again he is standing in front of the shop with the coats. He thinks he is standing in front of the shop with the coats. He is standing in front of the shop with one coat only. In his haste to return the new coat he has left the old coat. The real coat is still in the taxi. He thought he had taken it but he had not. He had left it there. Seeing the cab disappear into the hell of Chicago traffic he shouts after it. His knees feel weak. People stare at him as if he were mad. He cannot move. Finally again feeling the cold, he hangs the new coat over his head like a hood. The sleeves flap in the wind like evil birds. Staring at the cars passing by, he searches each window for the face of a child. To keep warm he hugs himself.

Survival

J. D. McCLATCHY

*During the terrible winter of 1895,
the German liner Elbe, bound from
Bremen to Southampton, collided
with a small steamer, the Crathie,
and sank into the North Sea within
twenty minutes, taking 322 lives.
Ann Bocker was one of the twenty
survivors.*

A storm had swollen the seas like sores that day,
And spray, blown frozen, iced the decks and railing.
We wore our clothes and coats and unlaced shoes
To bed, though night still numbed us two days out.
I could eat only biscuits and a baked apple,
And edged along the corridor to my cabin.
Mrs. Saunders hunched trembling on her bed,
So afraid she would be sick she could not sleep.
I dreamt of walking with Mother along the Serpentine,
Of pointing to skaters and sipping steamy chocolate.

A coughing echo seemed to crack the lake
Before a steward shook my arm, and shouts
of spilling skaters pushed against the door.
Mrs. Saunders would not let me pull her free,
But stared in stumbling horror at her vomit,
Whispering "Leave me alone. I am still sick."
I lost her hand, shoved up among the men
On a flare-lit deck.

Listing, the other boat,
mine, swung its women out, but one rope held
Iced in its pulley and the boat tipped open,
Shivering them like glass into the torn waters.
Axed loose at last, it slid down over them.

One man held his wife's gold watch like a fear,
Another struck a barefoot officer shouting calm
Through a megaphone, some wept away their strength
Against the shuddering collapse of wiry steel.

Sea winds swept us toward the last boat, hung
Like a slaughtered horse, now just above its own blood.
We straddled oarpoles to board, crowding as we could,
And unhooked our certain hope from the dead's night hull.
Across was the man from the lounge last afternoon
Playing chess with his daughter and losing with delight.
He stitched a smile and shifted his knees aside.
We fell through heaving waves which stood sharply
Like smoking cliffs luring us to climb.
Rocks soon burned through our boat, tore out my head,
Spiked my breasts, crushed my hands and sides.
I filled my breath with water to stop these fires,
I sucked down the ship, my throat's stricken flame,
Until I was alone and could hold my feet together
And sink back through the Serpentine to my room.

The light, as thin as first milk, slanted across
A bobbing lifebelt strapped to what it could not save.
Clumsily I climbed onto the familiar body it floated
And lay on his back and clenched his chest, my legs
Fallen between his, my face above the water slapping
His hair and the frozen eyes still searching
For his daughter in the dark.

The fishing-smacks ran by
And circled back, dragging me up over the side,
And fed me scalding soup until my lips blistered.
Their brown-sails figured the wind for Lowestoft,
Dipping quietly home.

We recovered to an awkward fame.
Boys bunched on the street before my hotel,
A bazaar sold my signature for sixpence,
I refused ten guineas to sit on a stage-chair.
The Queen invited me aboard the Royal Yacht.
I signed birthday books for her ladies-in-waiting,
And told the story softly in German to sighs.
She offered her sympathy like a small reward,
While we rode as far as Portsmouth, amazed.

Rack

R. E. SMITH

Halfway down the chain of communities stretching along the Great South Bay from Brooklyn to the potato farms at the end of Long Island is Clarion. Before the shopping centers turned half its eight blocks of downtown into blank windows with "For Sale, Lease, or Rent" signs, up above what used to be the Morris Shoe Shop was Irving Giacomo's pool hall. A half dozen tables, no cribbage, strictly pool. Originally, when Irving's father started it after the First World War, it may have had a name like the Pastime Billiard Parlor or the Golden Cue or even the Napoli Terrace, but that was long ago. Not even the four old men who used to sit opposite it on the bus stop bench all day during the summer knew it as anything but the Pool Hall or Irv's. It was an institution, one of those things accepted by a community as part of it, like the Presbyterian church or Oliveri's Deli, taken for granted until it's gone, then missed. The Pool Hall was just there, there until the black Cadillac pulled away from the curb below it for the last time.

Several weeks before, about mid-morning, Irving Giacomo stood at a window looking down the side street opposite the hall, watching the light on the water of the bay. The shore was far enough away that all he could see was a flat, bluish plain stretching to the horizon. He was a big hairy man and he looked a little like an ape as he scratched his stomach and stooped to look out. "Beautiful day," he said, "Outside."

Eddie Rickenbacker Forrest at the third table didn't say anything but climbed off his plywood box and dragged it around to the other side of his table.

"Nice day for enjoying the fresh air," Irving said. "When was the last time you went for a walk?"

"Don't remember," Forrest said, unbuttoning the suit coat

that hung halfway to his knees. He stretched over the table and lined up a shot.

"Hey," Irving said and chuckled, "know who you're named after?"

"Don't care," Forrest said. He played and climbed off the box to stalk his next shot, his head barely high enough to survey the table without standing on tip-toes.

"Tell you what," Irving said, "You decide to take the air, let me know. Just in case any calls come in for you." He chuckled to himself again. Forrest said nothing but continued shooting until the boys from the first lunch period at the high school began arriving. As usual, he spotted them ten to twenty points on twenty-five point games and still won every quarter and half dollar put on the side. As Forrest played, Irving left him alone and circulated between the tables setting up racks, collecting and making change from the carpenter's apron full of coins slung under his stomach. When the boys left, Irving sat on his high stool behind the counter, pulled out a couple of thick sandwiches and began eating. Forrest put down his cue, walked to the window, and gestured obscenely at the cashier in the diner across the street until he caught the man's attention. He took a bottle of strawberry soda from the cooler and sat down across the room from Irving.

"I need a toothbrush. And don't bring me one of those hard bristle ones this time."

"I'll bring you what I feel like," Irving said through a mouthful of salami.

"Thanks," Forrest said flatly as the delivery boy from the diner came through the door with his hamburger. Forrest ate in silence and went to his room where stories had it he rested with a damp rag over his eyes until school was out when he returned to play the boys and then men on their way home from work. During the lull when they had all gone for dinner, he signalled the restaurant again.

After the boy left, another set of footsteps came up the stairs, and Dolores Giacomo came in carrying a covered dish which she set on the counter in front of Irving. "Lasagna," she said, whisking off the lid.

Irving bent over, stuck his nose into the smell, then picked up a spoon and began eating out of the dish. "Good stuff," he said.

She watched him eat, smiled at Forrest who waved back, and asked, "You couldn't make it home early tonight, could you?"

"Something the matter? Something need fixing?"

"No. I just thought you might want to come home," she said, smoothing her cotton dress over her broad hips.

"I'll be there at the usual time."

"All right," she said, leaning over to kiss him on the cheek.

Forrest kept his eyes on her all the way to the door. "You got a good woman there," he told Irving.

"Not bad."

"Let me watch the place. That way you can go home." Forrest was leaning forward as he spoke.

"Like I told you before. No. My home life ain't none of your business."

"It might be. Without this place, you wouldn't have no income. No income, no home. And you got to admit without me there wouldn't be much income."

"There'd still be plenty of customers if you wasn't here."

"Like there was before I got here," Forrest said sarcastically. "When I walked in, this place was skidding bad. Now a lot of people are up here playing, practicing to beat me. They even come from as far away as . . ." He stopped to think for a moment before saying "Queens and Newark" as if they were San Francisco and Paris. "You'd be in bad shape if I left." Forrest grinned and leaned back against the wall. "So why don't you let me do something?"

Irving put down his spoon and made a sweeping gesture toward the door. "So put me in bad shape. Take off." Forrest stopped grinning. Irving ate some more and looked up again. "While we're waiting, why don't you tell me about the last time you tried?"

"Shut up!"

"You didn't even make it across the street. Spent three days working up your courage to get your own hamburger, and you were stopped cold by some kid on a bicycle. Looked so big you didn't dare cross the street. Haven't been downstairs since. Yeah, I know how you can leave."

"Shut up, you fat wop or I won't play tonight!" Forrest was standing on his chair shouting.

"Then don't. Go pout. Go to hell. See how much I care. You'll be back."

Forrest jumped to the floor. "The hell I will."

"You always do. You have to shoot pool and my place is the only place you can. Everybody else would throw you out at night."

"I can leave anytime I want. Anytime." Forrest stood in front of the counter looking up and almost screaming.

"Let's see you." Irving said, resting his elbows on the counter.

"Just watch." Forrest grabbed his cue and headed for the attic door. Five minutes later, he came down with a paper sack full of his clothes and his cue in an alligator case. He put them beside the door and went to the window. Outside, it was beginning to get dark.

"What you waiting on?" Irving asked.

"Nothing. I'm thinking," Forrest said as he kept stuffing his hands into his pockets and pulling them out again. Forrest turned away from the window and walked quickly back through the room. "Forgot something," he mumbled as he passed the counter.

"You didn't forget nothing," Irving shouted at the slammed door. "You can't leave and you know it." He raised his voice again. "You need me, buddy."

The evening customers looked at the bag and case as they came in. One or two eager players asked about Forrest, but Irving only said something like, "He'll be down later. Why don't you work on your bank shot until he shows up." Around ten, Forrest stormed into the room, carried the sack and case upstairs, and returned to run his table for twelve straight games, speaking only to Irving, once. Irving asked him what color toothbrush he wanted, and Forrest said, "a green one with one of those rubber picks on the end."

It was the next night, when every table was full, that the man first appeared. Slimly ornate as a fifty dollar pool cue, wearing a tailored dark green suit, he stepped inside the door and looked around until he located Forrest at the third table. The man appeared about forty, but it was hard to tell his age because his finely groomed hair was solid grey. As he moved into the room to take a chair opposite Forrest's table, he was followed by a younger man with a cue case. When the game was over and Irving was settling balls into his wooden triangle for the next game, the older man motioned the younger forward. He casually approached the table, putting his cue together. "What's it take to get in this game?"

Irving flicked the hair out of his eyes as he looked up. "Wait your turn. You better than other people or something?"

"I can make it more interesting than other people."

Irving stood up and looked at Forrest who was biting his

lip. "Let him play, Irv. He's Johnny Baker." Baker grinned at the recognition of his name.

"So?"

"He's good, Irv. He really is."

Irving looked at Forrest, at Baker, and at the man sitting quietly by the wall. "Okay, play," he said, lifting the rack. "It's a dime a stick. He makes his own bets."

The two lagged for break and Forrest lost. Just before he shot, Baker spoke. "How interesting do you want to make it?"

Forrest ran his hand in his coat pocket to weigh the bulge of change he had won that evening. "Ten dollars a game."

Baker laughed. "They told me you were big stuff. How about playing real hundred and fifty point games? Best two out of three for a thousand?"

"I ain't got that kind of money."

"Five hundred then." Forrest shook his head.

"One hundred?" Baker asked in a bored voice.

Forrest looked at Irving for help, but he shrugged his shoulders. A voice cut in from behind them, the lean man in the natty suit. "We're not here to make money tonight. Play him for ten dollars or ten cents, but you play him."

"All right, ten dollars," Baker said, throwing his coat on a chair and unbuttoning his collar.

"Twenty-five," Forrest said.

"Shoot." Forrest wiped his hands on his pants legs twice before beginning, but his aim was still off. One of the balls didn't make it back to its place. Baker sank it and went on for a short run of twenty-seven. He lost his turn when he called a safety, and Forrest shot his way out of the jam and followed it by putting in seventy-three balls. Baker took over and ran the table until he had his one hundred and fifty points for game. Without pausing to rest, Forrest signalled Irving to set up the next rack.

Halfway through the second game, the last playing customers stopped and moved down to join the circle around the third table. Some stood on chairs while two or three others were on the window sill, one hand hooked on the outside wall. Nobody stood in front of the grey-haired man. Irving placed himself at the other end of the table, just inside the circle, and stood with his arms crossed, the rack dangling from his left hand. High school boys in tight pants and bright shirts stood beside tie-loosened clerks, watching, no one talking except to make a bet, a cloud of cigarette smoke lowering into the room like fog.

Occasionally, a grunt of approval came after a difficult shot. The balls clicked softly. Forrest's box cut the silence with loud scraping as he pulled it around on the table. A spattering of applause broke out as he sank his hundred and fiftieth ball.

The circle relaxed a little at the end of the game but nobody left. Baker wiped his forehead and looked worried as he sat next to the man in the suit who talked to him quietly with small hand gestures. Forrest sat on his box sipping an orange soda. After about fifteen minutes, the circle tightened again, and the final game began with Baker breaking. Forrest played slowly and deliberately, checking his shots several times before pulling up his box to play. The game was a reversal of the first except Forrest took over sooner and had a longer run. Each ball Forrest sank brought a little more tightness to Baker's face, and each time Forrest dragged the box up, Baker winded at the sound. It was well past midnight when Forrest laid down his cue, straightened his coat, and walked to Baker sitting slumped in his chair.

"Cough up," Forrest said.

The man brought out a slim black wallet and handed three bills down to him. "That was good playing," he said, and he pointed Baker toward the door.

Baker stood up and looked at the man. "Please?" he asked.

The man considered Baker as if he were a derelict panhandler. After a long moment of cold silence, the man pointed toward the door again. Baker closed his case and didn't look back as he left. The man's attention swung back to Forrest with a gracious smile.

"Thanks," Forrest said, looking at the money. The man took another bill out and put it forward, folding it neatly in half with a flick of his fingers.

"What's that for?"

"I enjoyed watching you play. And I like your taste in clothes." Forrest unconsciously fingered his greasy orange tie. "Thought you might like something to extend your wardrobe."

Forrest took the bill but didn't discover it was a fifty until he watched the man thread his way through the departing crowd. Forrest ran to the window in time to see the shining black Cadillac with upstate plates pull away from the curb.

"How about that?" Forrest asked Irving, waving the bill above his head like a trophy. "I really showed them, didn't I?"

"Yeah. You were really hot stuff," Irving said, reaching for

his broom. "But don't get the big head. On you it'd be out of place."

"You're just jealous," Forrest said.

A week later the man was back but Baker wasn't with him. Irving was making change when he heard one of the boys behind him gasp and sputter, "Gaaaaa. Would you look?" Irving turned toward the door and saw the man enter dressed in a neat blue suit. Behind him came a woman, the first woman besides Dolores Giacomo to enter the pool hall as far back as anybody there that night could remember.

She was huge. Mammoth. Gigantic. Not roly-poly fat but towering and solid with extra weight all over her huge frame. She ducked her head to enter and her hips seemed to graze each side of the doorframe. Taller than any man in the room, including Irving, she wore a bright pink jersey dress that followed every massive roll and curve of her body, gently squeezing her thick biceps and hugging her expansive hips. The dress was belted at the waist, and her bosom stretched the material into an immense sideways V beginning at her shoulders, pointing at what seemed like two feet in front of her, and sloping to her waist. Across the top of the V, the dress was cut low, and her breasts bulged up into two pale mounds that shook every time she took a step, the long dark line of cleavage writhing and quivering between them. Her hair was a tall blond pile of curls, and over her left ear she wore a bright red rose the size of a man's hand.

"Sheeeee," Irving heard the boy say. "A man could get lost for a month."

"Shut up that damn obscene talk," Irving snapped. "Before I throw you out."

The woman followed the man across the room and down the wall until they were beside the third table. She moved in big, slow strides that pulled her skirt taut with each step. When she sat down, she used three chairs, sitting in one, leaning back onto another, and resting her legs against a third so her skirt rode up to give all the men a full look at her wide thighs and her calves tapering toward her large but neatly pointed gold sparkle high heels.

As soon as they were seated, Irving strode up to them with all eyes in the hall on him. "No women allowed in here. This ain't no burly house."

"Odd," the man said as if Irving had asked him what time it was. "We didn't see any signs prohibiting women."

"Everybody knows this is a man's place." Irving's voice rose.
"But are there any signs?"

"Signs or no signs, this is my place, and I say no women."
Irving hooked his thumb into the top of his change apron.

"If there aren't any signs, we are perfectly within our rights," the man said.

"You don't get out of here, I'm calling the cops."

"Please do. They'll simply tell you what I just said. They might even say you can't keep women out, period." The man looked at the men watching. "Please continue," he said with a broad gesture. Few moved. "Go on, please. Nothing is going to happen."

Slowly, play resumed with the men looking sideways and around each other at the woman who smiled back with half-closed, sleepy looking eyes. Irving watched them turn back to their games.

"If I don't call the cops," Irving said, lowering his voice.
"I'll throw you out myself."

"If you touch either one of us, I'll see you get the maximum sentence for assault and batter. Now, I believe some of the boys down there need your services." The man indicated the first table where a game had just ended.

Irving looked him in the eye. The man sat straight and returned the stare until Irving began to shift his weight and finally turned his eyes away. "Just see you behave," Irving said as he moved off, checking back over his shoulder.

Forrest was on his box staring. The tip of his cue rested on the floor, his head jutted forward, and a thin string of saliva was starting down the left side of his chin. The man had to motion several times before Forrest shook himself, climbed down, and walked over to them. Once in front of them, he kept his eyes on the woman who smiled down at him.

"I brought a friend to watch you. Her name is Taffy."

The woman leaned forward so all Forrest could see was a vast expanse of bosom and spoke for the first time. "I just couldn't believe you beat Johnny Baker. He was sooo good," she said, lengthening some of her vowels.

Forrest grinned. "I've beaten everybody this evening too, and I ain't even breathing hard. Just watch." He returned to his table and skunked six opponents in thirty minutes. "Pretty good, huh?" he asked when he finished.

The man nodded, "Very good," Taffy said, running her hand along Forrest's arm.

"We have to go," the man said. "Taffy really wanted to meet you, but we could only drop by for a while. We'll be back soon."

As they stood up, Taffy engulfed Forrest's hand and held it all the way to the door. Forrest waved goodbye from the window and went to stare down the stairwell for ten minutes. Then he went to his room and didn't come down until closing time.

"Those people really like me," he said to Irving as he began the nightly ritual of sweeping out "Did you get a look at that Babe? She likes me. Did you get a look at that suit he had on? I'm going to have me one like that."

"Keep talking. Like you're going to leave this place someday."

"I just might do that."

"Sure you will. You're trapped and you know it and don't forget it," Irving said, jabbing his finger at Forrest. "All your fine friends aren't going to change that."

"Don't lecture me or I'll leave right now."

"Take off," Irving said, leaning on his broom.

Forrest stood glaring for a little, whipped around, and walked to the door. He hesitated, took a couple of deep breaths, straightened his coat, and stepped across the threshold. Irving listened but didn't hear any footsteps descending the stairs, and he waited for Forrest to make another move.

Irving watched the clock until finally Forrest stumbled back inside and leaned against the door panting. Irving let out his breath. "Wow," he began. "Beautiful. You went a whole minute and a half that time. But that doesn't beat your record, does it not? You'd have to stay out three minutes and make it all the way downstairs to do that. Why don't you rest a year or two and try it again later. Maybe you can get your friends to help you." Irving stopped talking, grinned at the trembling figure, and started whistling "Beyond the Blue Horizon" as Forrest stomped past him toward the stairs.

The next morning, Forrest received a heavily perfumed pink envelope which he took to his room. Another envelope arrived the following morning plus a package with the same combination the next day and the next. Forrest began wearing new clothes and started to smell strongly like pine needle aftershave.

When his wardrobe was completely revamped, when he swaggered in to play each night in black and white shoes, pale blue pants, a burgundy blazer, and a green tie with a hula girl painted on it, the man and Taffy returned. As they took their

places by the ball, Forrest ran over and sat between them. Irving pointed at the empty table, but Forrest flicked his wrist and refused to look at him. Leaning back against Taffy's arm, Forrest listened to the man talk and watched the smooth gestures he made with his white cuffed hands. Forrest's grins flashed off and on like the diner sign across the street. Once, the three stood up and moved to the window with Taffy holding Forrest's hand. The man pointed out the window if he were indicating points of interest, and they sat back down. Finally Forrest returned to play until closing time, checking occasionally to make sure the two had seen him make a difficult shot. Each time he looked, Taffy leaned forward, her breasts bulging outward, and smiled.

As the last customers were leaving, the man took out a pocket flask, handed it to Taffy, and nodded toward the soda cooler. She led Forrest to the end of the room while the man called Irving over. Irving had just begun sweeping and took his broom with him as he crossed the room.

"As we understand," the man began. "Mr. Forrest pays you no rent and there has never been any kind of contractual agreement between you. Correct?"

"Yeah," Irving said slowly, thinking. "He just came in one night and things got started."

Good. Then he is free to leave and we would prefer you give us no trouble tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Irving guffawed. "He's going to leave? That's a joke. You know how many times he's tried before?"

The man didn't smile. "Approximately forty-seven times in the past three years."

Irving quit laughing. "How'd you know?"

"We've kept close watch on Mr. Forrest for some time, and he has been very helpful in supplying us with information."

"Who's we?"

"My associates and I." The man handed Irving a card from his wallet. It read "L. Nicholas Carletti, Precision Products, Inc., Vice-President in Charge of Personnel."

Irving looked at the card, then at the man, and back to the card. "You guys are," Irving started but didn't finish the sentence.

The man gave a small smile and bent his head forward in an assentive bow.

"What are you so interested in him for?"

"He's a good pool player and deserves better than playing

for quarters for the rest of his life. With us, he'll travel, wear decent clothes, enjoy himself."

"What's in it for you?" Irving's voice was beginning to take on a hard edge.

The man gave a modest cough. "You're not very trusting, Mr. Giacomo."

"Some people it don't pay to trust."

A giggle came from the direction of the soda cooler. Irving started to speak, but a second giggle cut him off and he turned toward the noise. Taffy was sitting, leaning back. Forrest's black and white shoes were on the floor, and he was standing in her lap, a foot on each thigh, his hands on top of the exposed breasts, nibbling her ear.

"I," Irving said, leaning forward heavily on his broom. "I don't believe it."

"You'd better believe it," the man said.

"He'll never leave. He's too scared." Irving kept switching his eyes back toward the drink machine.

"He is a little disturbed by the outside, that we admit," the man said, smiling as he watched Taffy and Forrest. "But we can offer him protection, mobile protection such as you can't give him. And besides, you can't fight something like that, can you?" He gestured toward the couple.

"You get out," Irving said. "You get out and take that whore with you."

"Careful. There's no point in being unpleasant. We can be unpleasant in return, I hope you understand." The man stood up and called Taffy's name once. "We'll see you tomorrow."

Taffy came over leading Forrest who was still in his stocking feet. Forrest stuck his tongue out at Irving as the three moved toward the door where Taffy bent over voluptuously and kissed Forrest so loud Irving heard it thirty feet away.

Forrest waved goodbye at the window and moved back into the room, staggering a little. At the third table, he picked up his cue and swung it over his head. He stopped, put it to his shoulder, and sighted in on Irving. "Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow. Got you," he said, smiling and lowering the cue. Dragging it after him, he moved to the attic door. "Good night," Mr. Giacomo," he said with a sweeping gesture, almost tripped on the first step, and shut the door hard behind him.

Irving stood without moving, his lower lip pulled down to expose his teeth and he heard Forrest stumbling above. His eyes fell on Forrest's shoes by the cooler. Irving picked them up,

stomped to the attic door, pulled the door open, and threw the shoes as hard as he could up the stairwell, and slammed the door shut. He tossed his money apron into the safe and left without sweeping up.

The next day the only indications Forrest was in the building were the groanings of his bedsprings overhead. About five o'clock, when Dolores Giacomo had come and gone with Irving's meal, Forrest emerged with his sack of clothes and cue case. He immediately disappeared into the bathroom. "Good evening, Mr. Giacomo," he said as he came out, a little pale, and carried his things to the bench by the window.

"Shut up."

"Isn't it a fine evening out? Just the right time of day for a drive up the Hudson."

"Shut up, will you."

"I'll be thinking of you and this crummy guinea pool hall while I'm riding in a Cadillac. I'll think about it every time I'm shooting in somebody's mansion or in some big hall with carpet on the floor."

Irving jumped off his stool. "Shut up, will you," he shouted, crossing to Forrest. "Shut up and listen to me for just once." Forrest looked at him as if he smelled bad. "You know who those people are? They're hoods. Precision Products is nothing but a big front. You know what kind of personnel work your friend does? He buys people. Fighters, card players, jockeys. Anybody people can bet on. That's when he's not working on casinos and whore houses. How do you think he found that elephant you're in love with? Nobody ever catches him and his friends because they put the money into supermarkets and stuff like that so the state auditors can't catch up with them. And they're gonna use you to make money too, then bust you on your ass. What do you think that Baker guy was begging for? They were getting ready to let him have it for losing. And they're going to do that with you some day if you walk out of here." Irving finished, and by the time he ran down, he was bent double, his face on a level with Forrest's. "Listen. I'm asking you, don't go."

"And you never made any money off me, I suppose?" Forrest asked.

Irving was silent for a moment. "You're good for business. I got to admit. You helped me a lot, but didn't I always give you fair deals? Brought you what you wanted and never overcharged you nothing? Never tried to stop you from leaving either until now?"

"You never helped me neither."

"I promise," Irving said. "You stay and I'll help you. I'll even carry you outside myself."

"I'm already being helped, thank you," Forrest said coldly.

From below came the sounds of heavy cars pulling to the curb, the soft sounds of big wheels stopping, the barely audible throbbing of engines. The throbbing stopped and was followed by the sharp sounds of doors opening and shutting.

"That's them," Forrest said, turning to the window.

Irving reached out to stop him. "Hurry. Take your stuff upstairs and hide. I'll tell them you left early or something."

The sounds of heavy footsteps moving in unison came out of the stairwell.

"I'll make you a partner. You can watch the place at night."

"Take your greasy wop hands off me."

Two tall, broad-looking men entered and without saying anything pulled Irving away from Forrest and slammed him against the wall opposite the door. Two other men followed and then two more stepped inside to stand in an irregular formation eyeing Forrest. Taffy entered in big slow steps, looked at Forrest with her sleepy eyes, and said, "Hi, lover" in a deep breathy voice. The man came last. "Are you ready, Mr. Forrest?"

"He ain't going! Irving shouted, struggling against the men holding him. "He changed his mind."

"You didn't say anything like that, did you?" the man asked Forrest.

"No sir," Forrest said, pulling his eyes off the four men hulking over him.

"Good," the man said. "All set?"

"Sure." Forrest climbed off the bench to pick up his bag of clothes.

"No need to bother," the man said, pointing to one of the men who picked up the bag and took Forrest's cue case from him. The man motioned a second time, and the two holding Irving released him and joined the others to form a circle with Taffy and Forrest in the middle.

"Don't go," Irving said, rubbing his bruised shoulder.

"The decision has already been made, hasn't it, Mr. Forrest?"

Forrest looked out from the circle of men. "I'm going Irv," he said. "I have to. There's a lot out there."

"Come on, lover," Taffy said. "There's lots of good times too. I promise."

"Anytime you're ready," the man told Forrest.

"What?"

Taffy bent forward, put a hand on either side of Forrest's face, and whispered, "You just give the word and we're gone."

Forrest looked at the room a last time, grinned weakly at Irving before finally turning away, stood as tall as he could, and shouted, "Let's go."

The men started toward the door, moving Forrest with them. At the threshold, Forrest hesitated, but Taffy, without missing a step, grabbed him under the armpits and lifted him through the doorway.

"Stop!" Irving shouted, starting forward. He ran to the door as if to reach through the wall of men and jerk Forrest back. As Irving reached the stairs, the last man turned, brought a fist up from the level of his stomach and slammed it into Irving's face, knocking him backwards into the room to thud against the floor, the change in his apron spilling and rolling in all directions.

"Hey, you okay?" The voice kept prodding Irving as his eyes cleared and focused on the waterstain on the ceiling. He moved his head and found one of the high school boys leaning over him and two standing back looking scared. "You all right, huh?" the boy repeated.

Irving grunted and nodded slowly, rolling to a sitting position. "Yeah. I'm fine," he said thickly. "You can go on and play."

"Which table?"

"Doesn't matter." Irving looked at his feet until he heard the boys begin. He picked up all the change around him then got to his hands and knees and crawled over the floor replacing the nickels, dimes, and quarters in his apron. As he finished, other customers came in and began playing.

"Where's Forrest?" one of them asked as Irving stood up.

"He won't be down tonight," Irving said without looking at them. "He's, he's gone for a while." The boys nodded and left as soon as they finished the game they were on.

When the last customer left that night, Irving dragged his broom to the back and swept out slowly. He brushed the tables and set up racks for the next day, leaving the third table until last and carefully cleaning it, and making sure a tight rack rested with the apex directly on the spot. He even dusted the counter.

He admired the tables as he put his apron in the safe. The door clicked shut and he stood listening. The only sounds were an occasional car going by below but none of them stopped.

Irving grabbed a cue off the wall and made a rough break shot at the third table, scattering balls to all corners. Shooting rapidly, constantly flicking the hair out of his eyes, he played for twenty minutes, then threw the cue on the table and climbed back onto his stool behind the counter.

He was still there an hour later when Dolores came in. She was almost to the counter before he noticed her. "Irv, it's late."

"I know."

"What happened?"

"He left. He's gone. He ain't coming back."

She saw the disorder on the third table. "Who did that?"

"I did. I couldn't even finish the rack." He turned toward her. "There wasn't nothing I could do. Nothing. And I tried."

"Maybe you shouldn't have razzed him so hard."

"I didn't mean nothing by it. I liked him. All along I really liked him." He slumped forward on the stool and stared at the blank counter top. "Aw, hell," he said, "maybe I was too hard on him." Dolores was silent as he stared again. "I should have told him." Irving said. "I should have told him. I should have told him." He was quiet for a long time before he spoke again. "You go on home. I'll be there later."

"I want you to come with me."

"What for? This town's safe."

"I just do. Please."

"Nah," he said.

She took him by the hand. He looked at her and her hand but let her lead him to the door. She took the ring off his belt, pushed him through the door, turned off the lights, and locked the door behind them.

The Survivors

WILLIAM STUCKEY

Rounding a shed this August noon,
I came upon a thistle bush
standing shoulder high
in an abandoned cinder dump—
God, what a specimen:
Eight wrist-thick stalks
bristling in the shimmering heat.

I touched the silky hair-ends
of its stunted bloom (crew-cut head),
scraping a knuckle
on a switchblade leaf,
and wondered out of what
primordial form it had progressed
to this grim state.

Had it been, in an earlier time,
like the iris or the rose,
and dropping into some burnt out hole
gradually adapted into this?
Or, God help us, had it devolved
from a more virulent form,
some outmoded dragon seed?

Whichever way it came to pass,
there it stood:
back against the wall,
roots clutching the ruined soil,
and at its feet (I saw on looking close),
miniature replicas springing up,
preparing to inherit the earth.

The Shadows

NATHAN CERVO

Pluto raised his rooty mouth and shouted
orders to the triple-headed dog.
"Cerberus," he cried. "Keep from the portal
the present breed of human shade."
But the horrible cur snuffled helplessly,
knowing no longer which way
was in or out.
And the clammy kingdom twittered richly
with the dead, both the sort
who boiled the infant Dionysos in a pot
long ago and the recent Pandar's tribe,
who dusted hope out as well,
who let Jesus fly off the cross
like a scrap,
the affixing nails removed.
Pluto blushed at such surfeiture.
Mineralized, ashen, red and grey by fits,
he was appalled at his wealth.

Snow Poem

DAVID B. AXELROD

Snow plow sounds scrape my dreams
of first heavy accumulations:
percussion symphonies of cars,
tires iced, whining; wind
winged snow against the windows
and persistent neighbors hacking
at their walks. Moments of silence
that begin to creak a counter-
point of footsteps and a shovel
dragging behind. I awake, blinded
and disillusioned by a light-
show of sun refractions through
a frosted pane, the ground as
bare and plain as when I'd bedded.

Two Dubliners

DAVID THORBURN

Stephen

Homeless, he stalks an abstract art,
Peacock guilty, caught in himself,
Afraid of water. A rich grim
Wit redeems him partly, and that
Unlikely friend he meets at night,
A cuckold in mourning who would
House him, teach him to bathe.

Poldy

Wedded now to age and random loss
He husbands a nostalgia of flowers
And mountain: one pulse of time
When seedcake, crushed upon his lips,
Nourished a sleek hero, owner
Of clearness and a lover's grace.

Graphology

MARY LOUISE TIETJEN

Ancient symbols show a loving hand:
observe the curve, the arabesque and flow
in those old valentines
to earth and air, fire and water,
to life itself—a tender script,
calligraphy designed to say it with a grace—
ankh and wheel, horn and shell,
crook and crozier, fleur de lys,
and that great bow of omega, open-ended . . .

but how to read this sign, this crux—
stark and basic mark,
harsh statement,
bar to beauty?

Who wrote it, wrote it hard
as if to cross out everything before.

Algebra Teacher, Sunday Night

HENRY PETROSKI

Back to face the black wall
Tomorrow. Sixty eyes
Will tick my teacher's twitch
Off till the holidays.

Risking contracting white lung
Disease and poverty,
I will pick up chalk butts
From a dusty gutter

And turn my shiny seat
And bare achilles' heels
On a stylish audience
Of pragmatists.

I'll show them how,
Though A works twice as hard,
B will go twice as far
And make X times as much

Money. The root of all
Evil is tax: Percent-
Ages and compound interest,
Principals and balances,

They'll always miscompute
Their way. Proudly they cheat
And know all the angles
Of philanthropy. They give

Excuses only I
Would accept. They demand
I teach them everything,
Because I am the teacher.

Marginalia . . .

(continued)

revolution did take place, but like so many revolutions elsewhere, the results have been a distinct disappointment. Like Benjamin in *The Graduate*, today's young person can only look incredulous when someone offers the word "plastic" as the key to his future.

Yet there is a depressing amount of evidence that "plastic," at least in the metaphorical sense, may indeed be the hallmark of our future. In politics we are getting all too familiar with the candidate who comes pre-packaged in a plastic bag labeled "Image," needing only the hot lights of television for defrosting and serving. In entertainment we have the manufactured musical, the formula TV show, the pseudo-profundity of many song lyrics. In publishing, the best seller list is generously sprinkled with "non-books by non-writers for non-readers" as someone has described such books as those by Doctors Reuben and Atkins.

Any regular reader of little magazines and avant-garde books will have to confess, also, that the plastic and the shoddy are not the exclusive property of the best seller list. I have in mind the poems whose principal distinction is spacing of words, the stories whose claim to distinction is either their obscurity or their unflinching devotion to a diction once considered unprintable. Most pretentious of all is the draping of shoddy craftsmanship in the mantle of art and the labeling of all who criticize such "art" as philistines.

Lest this be taken as another fossilized moralist's fulminations against the modern world, let me assure you I wouldn't live in any other. As Thoreau put it, "A living dog is better than a dead lion." This old dog can stand a certain amount of plastic, can even accept it as part of the price of life in the modern world. But it is more than a little upsetting when plastic is merchandised and valued as though it were pure gold. That's what is really insidious about life in the Shoddy Society: after awhile, the shoddy begins to look good to you. You no longer know or care what the real thing is. How else explain the phenomenon of Jonathan Livingston Seagull being considered profound, or Rod McKuen being described as a poet?

No, I think it is still better to presume the emperor naked until you've had time to feel the material and check its durability. After all, it may even be a shoddy plastic.

—John Keenan

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